

## On The Way Back by peachyfruit

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** AU cause we don't really know about them, F/M, Jopper but not necessarily endgame Jopper, Summer After Highschool, smutty but there's other stuff here too

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers

**Relationships:** Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2016-10-12

**Updated:** 2016-10-12

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 21:27:29

**Rating:** Mature

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 3,484

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

"She had known him as James Hopper, as a little girl. In a town so small, they were practically neighbors, even if he didn't live in the same neighborhood."

A little on how Joyce Byers and James Hopper grew together and then apart.

## On The Way Back

She had known him as James Hopper, as a little girl. In a town so small, they were practically neighbors, even if he didn't live in the same neighborhood. In a town so small, they were always in the same class. She would remember his name being called out during attendance, but mostly during recess and PE, when a teacher would have to try to stop him from climbing some tree or building. He would always laugh at their worry, many little boys like him thought they were invincible, but he would always listen to them anyway. He never really got in trouble, he was like Lonnie, all he had to do was smile to get out of it. She interacted with him as much as any other boy, which was not much in the age of cooties. But sometimes they were paired up together for some group work or another, but those memories are long gone.

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Spin the bottle was mostly a middle school venture, an elementary school one for the crazier kids of Hawkins. He was Jim to her then, and just like every other boy in the small town. But he was kind of cute, so she wasn't too upset when she was paired up with him for seven minutes in heaven. She doesn't remember the kisses much, just that they were sloppy and that he held her hand that night. But right before they kissed, she does remember that he kept looking at his hands and his breathing was loud in the closet, even louder than the giggling outside.

"Um, are you okay," Joyce asked, afraid that he would throw up like Bobby Levy had at the last party.

"Yeah, just, uh, it's dark in here," he said, finally looking at her. She could see why it would be worrisome, the closet was tall with old dusty clothes hanging in it and they only have some light seeping through the bottom of the door. Joyce was more worried about their impending kisses than dark closets.

"Well, if you close your eyes, you won't notice how dark it is," she says and she feels silly but she also wants to get this kissing over with so that her palms will stop sweating. And he closes his eyes and she

leans forward to kiss him for the remaining 5 minutes they have in a closet nicknamed Heaven. He didn't ask her to be his girlfriend the next day, didn't even brag about the kissing, he just kept being a boy she sometimes hung out with in groups. And Joyce kept looking at Joseph in math class, the 15-year-old still in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, hoping he would ask her out.

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Joyce mostly remembers Hopper from the wild parties with the cheap beer and weed that was basically dirt. They didn't necessarily belong in the same group of friends, but they could easily hang around each other at a party, talking about some class or passing a drag. She was going steady with Lonnie by 16 and she swore she was in love. Lonnie's kisses were rough and a little sloppy but he always kissed her forehead before he would leave her home for the night. The first time they had sex, they were crammed in some old Pontiac he was rebuilding. For the big game that Lonnie talked, she was surprised to find that he was a virgin. Though he was gentle with her, it would take a couple of times before he got her to cum.

Jim was Hopper by then, and on and off with some girl or another, including Vanessa, her best friend. Hopper was easy with a smile and even Lonnie would relax around him. Those days felt like the best time of her life for years to come, when she would be waiting up for Lonnie to get back from whatever bar he was at and the only communication she had with Hopper was a wedding invitation that they couldn't afford to attend. She hadn't even known he had found someone, she had incorrectly figured that he would knock up Vanessa and they would be neighbors. She threw away the invitation 3 months after the wedding, Jonathon was a two years old by then and Lonnie had left her the first time.

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Callahan was an idiot who couldn't fill out a missing pet form without having to ask Florence about some section or another. She wasn't sure if it was his stupidity or attention to Hopper's personal life that made Callahan narrow his eyes the couple of times he saw Joyce and Hopper together. But Joyce couldn't blame him for insinuating that Hopper and her were having some sort of fling, he

was too young to remember their post high school days. Not that they ever had anything serious, not between Joyce's rollercoaster relationship with Lonnie and Hopper's adventure into the big city.

No, what they had was a couple of months between Joyce's second breakup with Lonnie and Hopper's summer job before his move to New York. Two weeks before their high school graduation, Joyce found out that Lonnie had been sleeping with some junior and that he had a job lined up in Gary. She was happy to get a job at the grocery store, a promotion of sorts from the burger joint she had worked the year before. Though Hopper already had a job as a mechanic's assistant, he was saving up money for the move, so they worked side by side for the evening shift. It didn't take long for them to start sharing beers by the quarry. They didn't talk much about Lonnie, in part because Hopper knew the whole story from Vanessa and because there wasn't anything to be done, either Lonnie decided to come back or he didn't.

They were talking about the bet on jumping from the quarry that no one had attempted and Vanessa's dream of being a Beatles' groupie.

"Vanessa would definitely be their favorite groupie, if I know anything," said Hopper, taking a long drag of their last Marlboro. Their 6 pack of Budlight sat on top of the car, two of the beers in their hands.

Joyce carefully took the cigarette from fingers, wondering how he never burned his big hands on the dwindling Marlboros. "That's funny, because she says you wouldn't know anything."

He scoffs and then laughs as he takes a drink from his beer. This is something she always liked about Hopper, that he could laugh at everything including himself. "Well, she did have to teach me a few things, that's for sure."

"She told me she had to teach you everything," Joyce is grinning wide by now.

"Well, at first, yes, but then after a couple of break ups I taught her a thing or two."

"Trust me, I had to hear all about the things you two did and didn't do."

"Poor you"

"Yeah, I had a couple of nightmare filled nights, Hopper. But that's okay, she then had to hear all about me and Lonnie."

"I do not envy her, at all. She would tell me that she pictured you two like some squirming ferrets."

"I don't know what's she's complaining about, or you. She wouldn't shut up about your small dick for a whole week before school finished." Joyce took a long drink from her beer, gulping hard enough to tickle her throat.

"Small dick? She must be really mad."

"So I guess that means that you two won't be getting back together?"

"Not if she thinks I have a small dick,"

Joyce's head tilts back as she laughs wondering how Hopper always stayed so carefree.

"I'm not saying I'm, like, amazing, but I am pretty good, you know." Hopper says in a low voice and leaning in a bit, as if he's telling her some great secret.

Joyce's beer was at her mouth, the skunky, fizzy liquid lapping into her mouth, her fingers wet and cool from holding onto the bottle's neck. The calm she was feeling in that moment breaks, as she spits up the beer and the bottle slips from her fingers. It hits the hood before falling onto the floor, but Joyce is too preoccupied trying not to spill her beer on her shirt instead of worrying if she dented Hopper's car.

"Oh god, here," says Hopper as he pulls out some bandana from his back pocket and wipes her mouth. Joyce can't stop giggling, her throat sore from the coughing, and Hopper's hands feel warm on her face.

"Well, if it's anything like your kissing, I might have to agree with

her,” says Joyce, her giggling had stopped but the grin was still tugging at her lips. Her cheeks were starting to hurt.

He was still close to her, with the handkerchief hanging between both of them and his breath on her cheek. “We were thirteen, I don’t think you should compare, besides you were there being bad with me.”

“I don’t know, I’m pretty sure the spit dribbling down my chin was yours because it was your tongue ramming down my throat, Hopper,” Joyce doesn’t know when her voice got low. It probably has to do with the fact that he is so close she only had to whisper. But he isn’t moving away and neither is she.

“You know, I think that a do over is necessary, if only to clear my name,” he whispers leaning in so close she swears she felt his lips move on her cheek.

She only hums, in agreement or in questioning she isn’t exactly sure, but she closes her eyes and waits for his lips to touch hers. And waiting with your eyes closed makes time go by so slowly, that she thinks that maybe he’s changed his mind. But then she feels his hands back on her face and in her hair, quickly followed by his mouth. She thinks that he was waiting for her to say no or laugh it off, but she wants to tell him that he’s cute and she can’t be too upset that Lonnie is gone because Hopper’s lips are nice and his tongue warm.

She wants to remember every detail, compare it against Lonnie because she’s still angry at him. But she’s too warm to make comparisons and she can feel and hear Hopper’s breath as he pulls her closer to him. Hopper’s kissing her slowly, hand tugging at her waist and she is falling under him. Joyce runs her hand through his hair, to hold him to her, but he starts to move away from her lips, kissing her cheek and down her neck. She pulls him back to her. She doesn’t know how long they stay kissing like that, taking deep breaths through their noses so as to not move their mouths from each other. He feels solid above her, holding his weight on one of his hands, while the other still holds her waist. Even through her skirt, she can feel his excitement pressing up against her and she wants this. She wants Jim Hopper in ways she never felt with Lonnie, which was either lovingly or wild, both ways that made her forget herself

for moments. But with Jim, she didn't want to pretend anything, she wanted to hear his throaty chuckle against her neck and wanted to hear her name from his lips. The hand at her waist was spread wide over her ribcage, so close to her chest she was itching for his hand to move up.

But he kept kissing her languidly, occasionally moving his lips to her cheeks and neck. So she decides to move his hand on her, squeezing for good measure. He kept his hand there but he lifted his head, "Are you sure?" His voice was slightly breathless before she starts kissing him again, as an answer. But it's when she starts lifting up her skirt seconds later, so that she can better feel him, that he backs away from her. "This isn't what I meant. I mean, that's not why I brought you out here," he said furrowing his eyebrows, looking concerned. She wants to laugh again, laugh that Hopper is being such a gentleman when she had always secretly wondered what it would be like to sleep with him. She really couldn't be blamed, not with the way Vanessa is with details. But more than that, she wants to laugh because she wants this so much it should be obvious.

She decides not to laugh because then it would seem as if she was making fun of him. She just responds with an "I know," before pulling his hips closer to her. The next thing she knows, he's unbuttoning her shirt and dipping his hands into her lace bra and she's untucking his shirt and unbuckling his belt. They should probably talk about what they're doing, but that would break whatever string held them close that night.

It's a humid and hot night, but she still shivers as he pulls her skirt above her hips and his calloused fingers softly touch her. He's going slow again, not touching her completely, waiting for Joyce to stop him. But she only lifts her hips towards his hand and whines into his mouth. His rough hands feel so nice against her skin and when he moves away from her, she lets out a squeak.

"What are you doing?" she asks him, out of breath as if she had been running home after a late night, past curfew. He's not even near her anymore, but rummaging through his car, and she feels completely naked. She's starting to get scared that he's going to change his mind or that some pervy high-schoolers are hiding nearby.

“Just a sec,” he says, his voice muffled through the windshield. But a second feels like forever when your shirt is open, skirt above your hips, and underthings askew. She tries not to think about everything that can go wrong with having sex on top of a car, because she trusts Hopper. So she stares up at the stars and closes her legs to keep herself from feeling unpleasant coolness. She hears Hopper give a whoop and jump out of the car, with his pants half on. Though there are lights by the quarry, it’s still too dark on the roads over it that she doesn’t know what he needed. Until she hears the crinkle of foil and he’s in between her legs again.

“Is this okay,” he asks, hands on her thighs.

“Yeah,” she whispers back and shuffles down a bit, towards him. He pulls one of her legs high on his back and slowly presses into her. Maybe it’s because she’s only ever been with Lonnie, or because she never really thought she would actually have sex with Hopper, but she’s nervous. He isn’t small and seven weeks is the longest she has gone without sex in a while; she takes a deep breath as he releases one. The sex that follows is the nicest sex she has ever had. It isn’t wild or fast, like she usually knows it, but steady and calming. Hopper knows what he’s doing as he slowly moves within her, pressing in deep as he tilts up her hips.

One of his hands his holding on to her hips, as he pushes into her, while the other is pulling away at one side of her bra to lick her softly. He repeats this with her other breast and she moans his name. And when he starts to move faster, his hand goes to touch her again, whispering her name as his thumb draws in in circles.

He holds her hand the whole way to her house and makes sure she’s through the door before he drives away.

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On some nights, this (them) would go by a little faster and she would be thankful that his backseat was bigger than Lonnie’s two door car. But on other nights, like the one before he left, it would go slower than she thought sex could be; Hopper’s quilted cover felt so soft on her back and her name sounded like love from his lips.



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She was worried that he was going to be awkward the next day at work, that he wouldn't want to look at her or worse, ask her to be his girl. But their shift was just like any other shift, where he flirted with the moms who stopped by and took care to stock any heavy items. It wasn't until they were closing the shop, Robert who worked pharmacy had already left for the night, that Hopper made mention of the night before.

"So, hey, about last night," he said while sweeping the floor in front of the register, where Joyce was counting the money. She expected him to continue but he kept silent and sweeping.

"What about it Hopper?"

"No, I just, you know, wanted to make sure you were okay," he asked finally looking at her from the floor.

"Yeah, why? Did you give me something, Hopper," Joyce smiled, counting the last 21 cents in pennies and closing the register.

"Come on, Joyce. I just mean that it doesn't have to happen again or it could, your choice," his voice sounds calm but she sees his left hand twitch from where he's holding the broom.

"Oh my, the great Hopper wants to grace me with his sexual prowess, I'm honored," Joyce giggles, enjoying teasing him. Hopper was good at not being shy, and she felt good being the reason for his awkwardness.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Just, look, this doesn't have to mean anything. Or it can, mean something, if you want?" he says, looking at her in the eyes, almost serious if he wasn't so nervous. And if he were someone else, hell, if she were someone else, maybe this would be the part where they realized that they were meant to be. This would be the part where they would realize that they were in love, move to the big city, and have kids. But they aren't those kids you see in the movies, they weren't in love with each other. Joyce was still in love with Lonnie and would be for years to come, whereas Hopper would later find himself engaged to a woman

that he loved more than he ever had before.

“Hopper, you’re leaving in what, two months? Lonnie will be back before Christmas and I’ll be here working towards a car. Let’s just have fun,” replies Joyce, suddenly serious herself, no matter how light hearted she made herself sound. Hopper just looks at her for a moment, not saying anything or moving. His staring is broken by a couple of honks of passing cars, maybe some friends who were heading to the quarry for a bonfire like they did every Friday. They quickly close up and head over to the quarry. They arrive to a small bonfire and friends with beers to share. Hopper has the idea of bringing hotdog stuff and even Vanessa can’t keep a smile off her face.

When he takes her home at the end of the night, no one suspects their sudden intimacy and when they find out much later, after Hop had left for the city and a couple of days before Thanksgiving, they don’t mention it because Lonnie is back. Vanessa is the only one who notices while they were fooling around, but she’s just happy getting free beer at her parties, courtesy of Hopper.

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“I don’t think I made a wrong turn, can you hand me the map,” asks Hopper, driving with one hand as the other eats a burger. Trying to find their way back home from the Ives’ home, after stopping for lunch, is trickier than it was getting there. Joyce opens up the glove compartment and takes out a folded map but not without a box of condoms falling onto her lap.

“Still keeping them in the car, Hopper,” says Joyce, holding the box with two fingers, “how old are you?”

“You never know when you are going to find yourself with a pretty girl on your car, do you?”

Joyce laughs, deeply that she tilts her head back. She hasn’t laughed that much in a while, and with Will disappeared, she’s almost surprised that she can laugh. But this is Hopper, the man who could make her laugh at the worst of times. He was the man who could make her feel safe while she was half naked on top of a car. And he

was currently the man who she trusted to get her son back, even while it seemed impossible. So she allows that laugh to reverberate through her entire body before hitting Hopper on the arm with the folded map.

### **Author's Note:**

Author's Notes: I don't know if these two are in the same grade, but for the sake of this story, they just are. I also don't think it's very trustworthy to leave condoms in cars (it's too hot) but I was thinking that a teenager in the early 60's might not think about what heat does to condoms. I really wanted a story to explore the connection between Joyce and Hopper, which feels like it has intimacy but not necessarily romantic (or even platonic) love. I also don't know if I see a relationship for them right now, because I feel that what they need most is someone to rely on without the complications of love (and desire). I also think that Joyce is a mother dealing with a missing child and Hopper is a traumatized man who knows he's in some real deep shit, so I have a hard time thinking about them falling in love during this time.

SPOILER: I know technically this is not canon because David Harbour sort of confirmed that Jopper was a thing and Lonnie split them up (this fic was started before that news got to me) but I'm happy with this friendship turned FWB turned strangers turned partners. I really hope to see more fanfiction, or be inspired to write more. I have no beta so all my mistakes are my own, hit me up if something is

really messed up. Thank you.